

SHEEPSHEAD

Where to find them and how to catch them

The sheepshead is a member of the porgy and seabream species which are among the 120 species that make up the Sparidae family. The Sparidae have a worldwide distribution in temperate and tropical waters, but are most common in warm coastal seas.

The sheepshead is a large porgy. It reaches a maximum weight of about 20 pounds. The Sheepshead coloration is silvery to yellowish white, with an olive-brown back and five or six dark slightly diagonal bars along each side. It is found close inshore, often in the brackish zones of estuaries. It uses its flat long teeth to crush mollusks and crabs and to scrap barnacles from rocks and pilings.

Fishing basics:

These species are primarily taken by bottom fishing structure and wreck fishing. The fisherman should look for sheepshead along irregular bottom, wrecks, reefs and structure not too far from shore. Sometimes the sheepshead is so fast in taking live bait that it is difficult to hook. One exciting way to catch this bait thief is to heavily chum an area with shrimp or bits of shellfish. After the sheepshead have begun to feed, cast with a small ¼ ounce jig. On light tackle this is a thrilling and sporting fish to catch. Use a medium /medium heavy class rod (12 to 20 pound) with a bait cast or spinning reel with 12 to 20 pound mono line. Around reefs and wrecks, use an 4 foot long heavier leader, with a single hook or a 2-hook bottom rig, using hook sizes from #6 to 2/0. For bait, sheepshead do not readily take artificial lures. They are best fished for with live bait or cut or whole natural baits. These include crab, shrimps, mussels, clams, worms, sand eels, cut strips of mackerel, cuttlefish, squid or octopus.

Location:

In the northern part of Florida, sheepshead are found near navigation markers, pilings, rocks and inlet jetties. The best time of the year to catch them is the winter on the ebb and slack tides. During the spawning season, which occurs in the spring, sheepshead assemble into schools and move into shallow water to deposit their eggs. Many are caught at this time also. The largest sheepshead are usually caught in the northern Florida region.

In southern Florida, they can be found along inshore reefs, inside inlets, deep channels and along mangroves in the Florida bay area. Here the best time to fish for sheepshead are fall and winter during ebb and slack tides.